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SUBJECT: GOJ PREVIEWS NATIONAL AGENDA FOR REFORM TO COUNTER
PUBLIC SKEPTICISM

REF: A. SECTO 00033

[1](#)B. AMMAN 04326

[1](#)C. AMMAN 04125

[1](#)D. AMMAN 02378

Classified By: CDA David Hale for Reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Royal Court Minister Muasher gave a briefing to press June 22 on the status of the National Agenda committee, followed by a meeting on June 27 to discuss reform with private Jordanians. Promising feasible solutions rather than rhetoric, Muasher stated that work on the National Agenda was proceeding on schedule and that the committee had already devised some recommendations. Contacts indicate that discussions within the committee on political reform topics, particularly a new elections law, have been marked by sharp disagreement. Separately, leaders of 15 opposition political parties issued their own vision for political reform. End Summary.

BREAKING THE SILENCE

[1](#)2. (U) After months of relative silence, Marwan Muasher, Royal Court Minister and de facto head of the palace-appointed committee charged with developing a reformist "National Agenda" (refs C, D), updated reporters at a government press briefing June 22 on the committee's work. Highlighting some of the key challenges facing the country, notably poverty, unemployment and the budget deficit, Muasher promised that the National Agenda would avoid empty slogans and rhetoric, and instead produce practical recommendations and clear objectives designed to improve the lives of all Jordanians. The committee would also identify methods and a time frame for implementation of its proposals, along with a cost estimate. For example, Muasher said a preliminary recommendation to provide health insurance for all citizens in six years would include a timetable for adding beneficiaries to the insurance system each year -- and the resulting funds needed -- until the plan was complete. Once the National Agenda is finalized in September and then endorsed, Muasher pledged that each ministry would be held accountable to a detailed "action plan" and regularly report on progress in implementing its directives.

[1](#)3. (U) Muasher previewed a few recommendations already reached by the committee through discussions with outside experts and the reports of thematic sub-committees and working groups. On the economic front, he said the committee would recommend less reliance on imported oil by increasing use of natural gas and exploring the prospects of shale oil in Jordan. He was more general on political issues, stating that overall "principles" had been drawn that would help strengthen public and press freedoms, improve the status of women, promote an independent judiciary, and encourage political pluralism. Responding to public beliefs that reforms were being imposed from outside Jordan (i.e., the U.S.) to prepare for an influx of Palestinians (ref A), Muasher reiterated that the National Agenda was an entirely national product devoid of foreign dictates, and that it was not intended to "dismantle (Jordan), or part of a plan for settlement" of Palestinian refugees.

[1](#)4. (C) In another PR effort to promote the National Agenda, Muasher addressed a meeting of the Orthodox Club in Amman (a prominent private social club) on June 27 to discuss reform and the lifting of oil subsidies (septel). Contacts present at this meeting commented that Muasher was confronted with a number of difficult questions by a skeptical audience. Some complaints focused on the committee's mostly closed-door deliberations, with one audience member asking how the National Agenda would reflect "a national consensus" as promised by the government when the public was excluded from discussions. Muasher reportedly kept his composure very well and engaged in a lively debate on the necessity of change in Jordan. He emphasized that the National Agenda would not be laid aside by future governments as King Abdullah himself

would guarantee its application by successive cabinets.

INTERNAL DEBATE

15. (C) Both the press and Embassy contacts have reported that there is considerable debate within the National Agenda committee on sensitive political topics, particularly a new elections law. In a meeting with poloff on June 29, Senator and committee member Ousama Melkawi confirmed that there is currently a sharp disagreement on the outlines of a new electoral system. Specifically, within the sub-committee charged with examining this and other political topics (of which Melkawi is a member), opinions ranged from a purely proportional representation system that abandons individual districting, to a proposal favored by Melkawi that would increase the number of current districts by more than twofold. Melkawi said this divergence was "only natural" as the sub-committee contained conservatives (including himself), liberals such as Center for Strategic Studies Director Mustafa Hamarneh, and Islamic Action Front (IAF) leader Abdul Latif Arabiyat. When asked what would happen if no consensus could be reached, Melkawi speculated that a "majority vote" might be used to break an impasse. He also rejected the idea of public hearings or open committee meetings, saying this would be "too chaotic" and that the diverse committee members adequately reflected differing public viewpoints.

16. (U) The IAF is apparently not waiting for the release of the National Agenda to trumpet its position on elections. In a public statement released to the press on June 28, the IAF strongly denounced the current one-person, one-vote system of individual electoral districts. Instead, it advocated that each citizen be able to choose multiple candidates from a nationwide list, arguing that an MP should "represent the nation, and not only one group of people." The retention of a one-person, one-vote system, the IAF declared, would indicate that the government was not serious about genuine political reform.

A COMPETING VISION

17. (U) Similar to an IAF document laying out its vision for comprehensive reform (ref B), the leaders of 15 political parties loosely grouped together in the "Opposition Parties Higher Coordination Committee" released a memo on June 19 outlining their reform priorities. Among its provisions, the memo called for an end to the executive authority's "transgression on the Constitution by issuing (provisional) laws when Parliament was in recess or not convened." The Coordination Committee (dominated by the IAF) further proposed scrapping current "restrictive" laws on elections, political parties and public gatherings, and the abolishment of the Senate to create a unicameral parliament. On the economy, the memo -- heavy on criticism, short on details -- argued for halting the privatization of natural resources (specifically mentioning potash and phosphates), overhauling the tax system, and severing all economic (and political) links with Israel. After briefly meeting with these party leaders, PM Badran reiterated his commitment to political pluralism and respect for opposing views "as long as they abide by the Constitution and look after national interests."

COMMENT

18. (C) Muasher's public appearances to promote the National Agenda reflect growing awareness in the cabinet and the palace of public misgivings about the reform process (ref A).

While the 26-member National Agenda committee contains a good cross-section of private and public Jordanians covering the political spectrum (which has contributed to at times heated debate among members), the fact that its meetings (currently held about once a week), as well as the proceedings of expert working groups and sub-committees, are closed to the public has helped fuel conspiracy theories that are slowly gaining traction. The GOJ will need to counter these negative perceptions with increased PR efforts to dispel rumors and sell the benefits of reform. Greater transparency related to the National Agenda, including the King's recent pledge to MPs that committee members would shortly hold direct talks with them, will also aid in swaying public opinion.

HALE